

MUSICAL NOTES & COMMENT

Sacrosanct "Parsifal"—Wagner's Drama in Bayreuth and New York

New Efforts to Preserve a Monopoly—A Special "Lex Parsifal" Proposed in Germany.

For two months or more musical Germany has been rent by a new effort to preserve a monopoly of the performance of "Parsifal" for the Wagner Theatre in Bayreuth. The agitation looking to this end has been going on at intervals for more than a decade.

Under the existing law in Germany the copyright on the last of Wagner's works will expire at midnight of December 31, 1913; that is, the end of thirty years after the death of the author. Twice, at least, efforts to extend this term have been made and defeated in the Reichstag. The last time it went down under a vehement flood of oratory from Eugen Richter, the Socialist leader, who passionately set up the rights of the people in all art works, as against the rights of the heirs of the creator. The present effort is making under the guise of a general proposition to extend the term of protection of all art works from thirty to fifty years, or even for all time.

The discussion has therefore taken a wider scope than before, though the main point remains the perpetuation of the monopoly of Bayreuth. Statesmen, writers, artists, theatre managers, composers and others have been drawn into the controversy chiefly through the energetic labors of Herman Bahr, who is speaking throughout the length and breadth of the land and securing signatures to a gigantic petition to the national legislature. The contributions to the controversy are of the most diverse order, some breathing the spirit of pure idealism, others giving expression to more or less mercenary sentiments. The most sensational utterance has been that of Richard Strauss, the most shameless exemplar of commercialism in art that ever lived, who chases the nimble mark, franc, shilling and dollar with every vehicle invented by industrialism and trade. His fulmination was given to the world through the ingenious agency of a newspaper friend, one of his willing helpers in the field of reclame.

Wagner, from which city he sends his communications to the "Hamburger Fremdenblatt." To him Strauss sent a letter. Karpath protested to be alarmed at the effect which his violence might have and asked that he be permitted to modify some of its expressions, but Strauss refused to change it in any particular, and, thus dramatically intensified, it was given to the public in this shape:

"For me there is only one point of view in the 'Parsifal' question—respect for the wishes of genius. Unfortunately, however, the matter of the protection of 'Parsifal' is not to be decided by persons interested in the uplifting and refinement of our culture, but by jurists and politicians, whose horizon does not comprehend the unbounded rights of the owners of intellectual property. I personally attended the eight days' session of the German Reichstag at which the representatives of the German people, with a few exceptions, debated with enviable ignorance the question of authors' rights and the period of protection. I myself heard a certain Eugen Richter tread under foot the rights of a miserable two hundred German composers—including the heirs of Richard Wagner—in favor of 200,000 German public house-keepers. And this will not be changed so long as the imbecile law of universal suffrage remains in existence, and so long as votes are counted, not weighed; so long, for instance, as the vote of a single Richard Wagner is not counted as 100,000 and the votes of 10,000 footmen as one. When that time comes I might no longer hear, perhaps, in the Goethebund the phrase about the right of the German nation to plunder the genius which in life it banished and condemned and thirty years after his death to prostitute his works by performances in the filthiest of provincial theatres. We few will protest in vain, and the everyday citizen (Spiesbürger) two years from now on Sunday afternoons, between his dinner and his evening stoup of wine, instead of always attending a kinematograph show or an opera, will also hear 'Parsifal' for five cents. And yet we wonder that the Frenchmen and Italians still consider us barbarians in all matters of culture."

Nothing could be better adapted than utterances of this character, coming from such a source, to defeat the aims of the Wagnerian idealists, who have all that they can do to reconcile their master's many precepts about the democratization of art with the present effort to prevent the "profanation" of "Parsifal" by making it a democratic inheritance, like the works of Goethe, Schiller and all their great company, no less entitled to protection against "profanation" than "Parsifal." To it the Germans will be prompt in applying the words of Goethe: "Man merkt die Abscheu, und wird verstimmt."

New Yorkers who have the ability and have also made use of opportunities to judge are entitled to an opinion here.

It is an old observation that little else than amusement (since it would be foolish to show vexation) has ever been derived from foreign opinion of the artistic activities of New York. There have been a few men of mark who after a few years of participation in the musical life of the United States have gone to their European homes and told their old associates the true story of musical culture in such cities as New York and Boston. Mr. Gerike has done it, so has Mr. Nikisch. But their reports have fallen upon deaf or incredulous ears and been met with scoffing. New York is not at all concerned in the present agitation, since, righteously or unrighteously, "Parsifal" has been in the repertoire of the Metropolitan Opera House since December 24, 1903. Few of the accounts of the performances which have been maintained every year since then, written by foreigners, have done even half justice to our representations, which, in pursuance of one of the demands of the German idealists, let it be



Cristela Cori, Carnegie Hall.

observed, have been reserved for special occasions—religious and political holidays. Some of them have been absurdly malicious and mendacious. The present discussion has brought out two contributions, however, which are interesting to the local reader. Lilli Lehmann, writing in the "Neue Freie Presse" of Vienna, contributes a bit of pre-Concordia history. She says that in the winter of 1887 Mr. Stanton, then director of the Metropolitan Opera House, asked her advice as to the feasibility of giving "Parsifal" there. He said that there was no legal obstacle, but wanted her opinion as to whether or not the company of artists was capable of doing justice to the work. On that point she had no doubt whatever, there being at hand a "sufficient number of great artists, a wonderful orchestra, and Antonio Soli, probably the best of Wagnerian conductors." Nevertheless, she advised Mr. Stanton to leave "Parsifal" to Bayreuth, because, like no other work of Wagner's, it needed the devotional mood which surrounded it there; she told him that it should not be his to profane Wagner's swan song, and



Mischa Elman, Violin Recital, Carnegie Hall, Saturday Afternoon, Oct. 26.

begged him to renounce his pardonable desire in deference to an artistic ideal. Stanton followed her advice. She also advised him to pay royalties on the Wagner operas in the repertoire, although under no obligation to do so, and had the satisfaction of knowing that Mr. Stanton himself put in the hands of Mme. Wagner some 15,000 or 20,000 marks or dollars (she did not remember which), for which he was rewarded by a decoration from the Bavarian government. She then tells with considerable enthusiasm and a considerable amiable exaggeration of its artistic value the story of the festival performance of excerpts from "Parsifal" under the auspices of the Seidl Society in Brooklyn, on March 31, 1899.

There is a pendant to Mme. Lehmann's story which must wait on the fœtœn controversy. One of the earliest public responses to Bahr's appeal was an article, also in the "Neue Freie Presse," by Felix von Weingartner. While he professes to be against all special legislation as a citizen, Mr. Weingartner as an artist advocates a new law of copyright which shall make an exception in favor of "Parsifal." Nevertheless, he points out very appositely that Wagner had in his hands the means to put his wish that "Parsifal" be reserved exclusively for Bayreuth into effect, but did not embrace it. He needed only to refrain from publishing the score, and the drama would have forever been the private property of Wahnfried. He had, besides, paved the way for inadequate performances of other dramas, notably "The Ring of the Nibelung," by selling the right of performance to theatres generally, and was therefore himself responsible for their desecration. Moreover, to emphasize the point that Wagner's expressed wishes are of no weight in the case, he says that the composer not only had contemplated giving performances of "Parsifal" to some theatres, but in the case of the Royal Opera at Munich had actually done so. In spite of this, he favors a retention of the Bayreuth monopoly, on the ground that only in the festival theatre is it possible to secure the proper mood for the enjoyment and appreciation of the work. He says:

It is the house itself which at the outset creates the mood which we can attain in no other theatre. As in a Catholic church, the silent incense smoke, trembling through the semi-darkened room, arouses in us the feelings which are essential to a devotional attendance on the divine service, the sight of the Bayreuth house, its situation, the memories of its creator, the consciousness of all the great things which were projected here and carried out though only in part, fill us with a sort of devotional sympathy, which is intensified by the religious element and the conviction that the spaces of this house open to us something which is shut out from all the rest of the world, despite the fact that an American theatre director with daring hand ventured to throw a stone into the fountain of Wagnerism, and performed "Parsifal" on the other side of the ocean. But the waves created by this act were not strong enough to wash away the nimbus which attaches to Bayreuth by reason of its exclusive possession of "Parsifal." The New York "Parsifal" had no effect either externally or internally. It was an event, a sensation, like many others, but not a vital experience. True, it brought to our consciousness the fact that "Parsifal" is Wagner's ripest but not strongest work. Signs of senility were noticeable in the first act. The beginning of the second act fascinated everybody. It is true, by reason of the wonderful setting of the flower maidens scene, which left Bayreuth far behind; but the second half was not convincing. On the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House the pure fool who is so willingly accepted in Bayreuth, did not inspire belief. In the third act, by far the most beautiful in the work, in which we might almost believe luminous strands from Beethoven's last quartets are woven into the music, there was a disturbing want of intimacy which is so essential to this act, and which cannot be attained in large opera houses built for spectacular operas and ballets. At the end it became tiresome. But even if the New York performance had been better than it was it could not have been the Bayreuth "Parsifal."

There is something to be said now in amplification of the accounts of Mme. Lehmann and Mr. Weingartner; at the risk of appearing immodest the writer must become personal in the recital. There was a time before Mme. Lehmann had her talk with Mr. Stanton when a production of "Parsifal" at the Metropolitan Opera House seemed imminent. The writer was present at the first performance of "Parsifal" at Bayreuth in 1886. There was a foreboding of New York friends before the trumpets called the faithful within the sanctuary. Mr. Seidl was in an unhappy mood, and he told his companions why. He had just heard that Mme. Wagner had granted permission to the Court Opera at Munich to give "Parsifal." "I am going to make further inquiries," he said to the writer, "and if I find that the report is true I shall perform 'Parsifal' in New York next winter in spite of the prohibition." Seidl was a faithful adherent of Wahn-

fried; what he heard there, no doubt, led him to abandon his threatened act. But he could have given the drama had he wanted to, for Mr. Stanton was not always so Quixotic as he was when he permitted some professed Wagner attorneys to collect royalties on "Tannhäuser" and "Lohengrin." So much for that.

At the performance of "Parsifal" which Mr. Weingartner describes he was a guest of the present writer. There is a reference to his presence and his comments in "Chapters of Opera."

At a later performance Weingartner, conductor and composer, now director of the Royal Imperial Court Opera at Vienna, sat beside me. After the first act he spoke in terms generally complimentary about the performance, but criticized its spirit and execution in parts. When the scene of the magical garden was discovered and the floral maidens came rushing in he leaned forward in his chair, and when the pretty bundle reached its height, he could wait no longer to give voice to his admiration. "Ah!" he exclaimed in a whisper, "there's atmosphere! There's fragrance and grace!"

Mr. Weingartner has an excellent memory. Having confessed in his article that he has never been in the habit of withholding criticism of Bayreuth, he may, perhaps, not take offence when he is reminded that at dinner, between the first and second acts of "Parsifal," on the occasion in question, he defended against the arguments of this writer the action of Mr. Conrad in the rape of the drama on the ground that many persons are urging against the proposed "Lex Parsifal" now, namely, that it is too beautiful and significant a work to remain cooped up forever in the secluded Franconian town. He has changed his mind—which was his privilege. His position then had been

well expressed some years before by Hanslick in one of his brilliant essays:

We are not of the opinion that the temporal and eternal salvation of mankind depends upon the performance of an opera, even the most perfect performance. But fanatics who are of this touching mind ought to labor with all their might to make such salvation free to all, to send "Parsifal" out into the world, as Christ sent out his apostles, who did not remain in Jerusalem and preach to money aristocrats, tourists and reporters. We read every day that an uplift of German morals and German culture is impossible without "Parsifal."

H. E. K.

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